Self-Monitoring and Its Effect on Reducing Disruptive Behaviors

in General Education Classrooms

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Introduction

Teaching is a profession that requires its workers to be masters of multitasking. Similar to a juggling act, teachers must shift between planning and preparing for lessons, collaborating with colleagues and administrators, interacting with parents, performing administrative duties, and most importantly teaching their students, throughout any given day. The task of imparting knowledge is no easy feat when you consider the diverse populations of students within school systems. In New York City public schools alone, classrooms often accommodate a minimum of 25 students with various learning abilities and needs, cultural backgrounds, and individual personalities. This melting pot of student bodies is often present within the general education setting. This presents a challenge for teachers to not only provide developmentally appropriate instruction for all students, but also to create an atmosphere conducive to learning. Among a teacher’s many responsibilities is the management of his/her classroom, which plays a significant role in the academic progress of students, as well as their overall well-being (McGown, 2011). It becomes imperative then that teachers establish an effective system to manage students’ behaviors. Behavior management systems are of particular importance when it comes to dealing with students that have challenging behaviors, as they are the ones most in need of effective disciplinary strategies. Research has shown that self-management techniques, in particular self-monitoring, are an effective form of intervention to decrease inappropriate behaviors within a variety of educational settings, and with students with different grade and ability levels (Ganz, 2008).

Statement of the Problem

Students with challenging behaviors present several problems within the classroom. The primary issue is that they disrupt the learning process and are difficult to manage (Westling, 2010). Their disruptive behaviors, such as talking out of turn and getting out of their seats, hinder the learning process for their peers as well as themselves. The amount of time a teacher spends trying to manage these students lessens the amount of time spent on instruction. Furthermore, students that are habitually disruptive are most detrimental to themselves because they increase their chances to be referred for special education services (DuPaul & Hoff, 1998).

Secondly, a teacher’s already heavy workload weighs that much more heavier when teaching becomes a challenge due to students with problematic behavior. Oftentimes, teachers feel that they are not equipped to deal with disruptive students, which leads to feelings of stress (Ducharme & Schecter, 2011). The lack of training in the use of effective classroom management systems during a teacher’s pre-service career contributes to this. Teachers also feel that there is a lack of support within the school setting once they become professionals (Westing, 2010). Unfortunately, the combination of these feelings can sometimes account for teachers leaving the profession after only a short time of service (Clunies, Little, & Kienhuis, 2008).

There have been a variety of methods and procedures implemented in schools at state and citywide levels to address behavioral issues. However, students with disruptive behaviors continue to pose a problem at the classroom level. Traditional behavior management techniques, such as token-reward systems, or the use of detention and principals’ office referrals, depend heavily upon the use of teacher reinforcements, which deduct time that can be used for teaching (Westing, 2010). Clearly, there is a need for an alternative intervention method that would not deter from instructional time, but also help students improve their behaviors.

Review of Related Literature

Discipline has been and continues to be a major concern among educators. In an article by Smith and Rivera, discipline is defined as “…order among pupils so learning can take place without competition from unproductive forces” (Smith & Rivera, 1995). Teachers are required to maintain a safe and orderly learning environment in their classrooms, but are not always able to do so. Students with challenging behaviors cause teachers to waste instructional time in order to intervene and manage the student. Despite the common use of a variety of preventative and intervention techniques, such as, establishing rules, planning smooth transitions, and using token-reward systems, preventing discipline problems still remains an issue. Oftentimes, teachers will resort to quick-fire strategies, such as scolding students or placing them out of the class in order to gain control of the class. These types of management techniques are reactionary in nature and tend to backfire, as students will most likely engage in repeat offenses due to reinforcement (Ducharme, 2011).

Smith et al explored the possible origins of discipline problems. They propose that there are circumstantial elements, such as teacher expectations not matching the developmental level of the students, misuse of the physical classroom environment, and ill-planned transitional times that lead to disruptive behavior (Smith et al., 1995). They also suggest that boredom, frustration, or an innate desire on the part of the students to be disruptive may be the culprit. Finally, they examine the population of students that actually have behavioral disabilities, which may or may not have been diagnosed, and their inclusion into general education settings as a potential reason for discipline issues. The reason being that these students needs are not being met and they are targeted by their general education peers. Regardless of the reasons why discipline problems occur, an effective intervention is needed.

The current instructional strategies regarding the discipline used within New York City schools are prescribed in the Citywide Standards of Intervention and Discipline Measures (Discipline Code). It describes in detail unacceptable behaviors, one of which is disruptive behavior that interferes with the educational process, and the disciplinary measures that are used to address them. A combination of guidance interventions, such as parent outreach, individual behavior contracts, and intervention by counseling staff are used in conjunction with a variety of disciplinary responses such as, student/teacher/parent conferences, referrals to administration, and detention or exclusion from extra-curricular activities.The New York State Education Department offers behavioral assessments and intervention plans, along with individualized education programs that focus on providing positive behavior support for students with special needs.

The behavior management strategies that are used in schools today focus more on the consequences that the adult authority figures in students’ lives issue to manage problem behaviors. This leads to students relying on external reinforcements as a motivation to behave, rather than making them responsible by developing the skills they need on their own. An easier form of intervention is to teach students how to manage their own behavior. This would benefit teachers by allotting more time for teaching, and would make students more self-reliant.

Self-management is an alternative intervention method for behavior management that is increasingly being used in classrooms. In an article written by Mary McConnell, it is defined as “a cognitive-based intervention that teaches students to change and manage their own behavior” (McConnell, 1999). Studies have shown that self-management procedures can be used not only to improve students’ behavior, but their academic performance as well (Prater, 1994), including the completion of homework assignments (Axelrod, 2009). Rafferty reports that there are five types of self-management interventions, which are self-monitoring, goal setting, self-evaluation, self-instruction and strategy instruction (2010). Self-monitoring, in particular, is one of the most popular methods used and has had the largest amount of research done out of all five intervention types (Rafferty, 2010). In an article by Sheffield and Waller, the clearest definition for self-monitoring that pertains to this action research report is given, “monitoring one’s behavior by keeping track of how often a target behavior occurs by making a mark on a form at predetermined times during a designated class period as an intervention strategy to reduce problematic classroom behavior” (Sheffield & Waller, 2010).

There are many pros of self-monitoring, of which one is that it can reduce problem behaviors, and is effective over a wide range of age levels (from preschool to high school) and ability levels (general and special education classrooms) (Sheffield et al., 2010). Numerous studies have been conducted that prove the positive effects of self-monitoring on the reduction of problem behaviors as well as improvement of on-task behaviors in different grade levels (de Haas-Warner, 1991; Freeman, 2004); in both general education (DuPaul & Hoff, 1998; Harris, Friedlander, Saddler, Frizzelle & Graham, 2005) and special education classrooms (Amato-Zech, Hoff, Doepke, 2006); in students with a variety of learning disabilities, such as autism (Alber-Morgan, DeBar, Legge; 2010); mental retardation (Hughes & Boyle, 1991), emotional and behavioral disorders (Jolivette, Patton & Ramsey, 2006), and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (Mathes & Bender, 1997). Additional research reports have been written that reviewed multiple studies on students with disabilities, which also prove self-monitoring to be effective (Ganz, 2008; Ozkan & Sonmez, 2011). One study further examined self-monitoring’s effectiveness on students with learning disabilities and compared its effects on attention and performance by reviewing previous studies (Reid, 1996). The fact that this method has been tested on such diverse student populations, yet consistently showed positive results speaks to the ability of children to be self-aware and develop self-control. As students get older, these traits become increasingly important and necessary to function well in society.

Another pro of self-monitoring is that it can be implemented in a variety of ways yet still maintain its effectiveness in the managing of behavior. Research has shown that students can be taught to use self-monitoring procedures using the assistance of a tactile/auditory prompt called a MotivAider (Alber-Morgan, DeBar, Legge, 2010) or picture representations called Countoons (Daly & Ranalli, 2003). These aids are beneficial for students because they stimulate the sight and touch senses triggering their focus on their behavior. Self-monitoring can also be combined with other methods to form an intervention package. Studies have been done that paired peer-monitoring with self-monitoring where both methods were used on the whole class (Fowler, 1986; Mitchem, Young, West, Benyo, 2001). Students are known to be influenced by their peers, so having classmates assess each other in addition to their self-assessment can boost their desire to behave appropriately.

Other pros of self-monitoring are its cost-effectiveness due to the lack of needing expensive materials, the increased independence of students which leads to increased amounts of quality teaching time, and its use of a step-by-step procedure which is simple to teach to students (Vanderbilt, 2005).

In reviewing the literature, the cons of self-monitoring is that most of the research has been done in specific target groups, therefore, there is not enough conclusive evidence that supports its extension to all students (Jull, 2009). According to an article in the Journal of Remedial and Special Education, “although more than 240 self-management studies have been published over the past 3 decades, only 14 of these studies have targeted students with disabilities in general education settings” (McDougall, 1998). Further research needs to be conducted in general education settings.

One theorist that can be closely linked to the concept of self-monitoring is Dr. William Glasser (1925-). He developed his “choice theory” based on the belief that people can control their own behavior. In an article by Bucher and Manning, they report that Glasser believed that students should be able to change their behavior independently, rather than be managed with token/punishment systems (Bucher & Manning, 2001). Glasser theorized that the incentive for behaving stems from an internal desire to satisfy four basic psychological needs of belonging, power, freedom, and fun (Bucher et al., 2001). He believed that when any of these needs are not met, misbehavior begins. The functionality of Glasser’s choice theory for students is referred to as “young adolescents' ability and need to accept responsibility for managing their own behavior” (Bucher et al., 2001). This idea of independently controlling behavior can be linked to the self-monitoring strategies that have been proven successful. Students that have disruptive behaviors are able to manage themselves and improve. When they do, they are accepted more by their peers and are able to participate in class activities without punishments. This would satisfy their need for belonging and fun. Also, one would imagine that these students feel a sense of pride in knowing that if they are willing, they are capable of changing themselves. This would satisfy their need for power and freedom.

Statement of the Hypothesis

Training a group of 15 third grade students, at P.S. X in Brooklyn, New York, with disruptive behaviors of talking at wrong times and getting out of their seats to use self-monitoring strategies to manage these behaviors, will show a decrease in disruptive behaviors over a four-week period.

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